

The Relationship Between Catechesis and Theology in a University Setting in Light of the New Evangelization

I. Introduction

I am grateful for the opportunity to be a part of this symposium on Catholic education and the New Evangelization and to join with theologians, members of learned societies, and with fellow bishops and members of the Committee on Doctrine in this effort.

The topic on which I've been asked to speak is the relationship between catechesis and theology in a university setting in light of the new evangelization – a title almost as long as time allotted for the talk!

Accordingly I'd like to offer a few points on how catechesis changed in the last half of the 20th century and how those changes impact its relationship with theology; and what light the New Evangelization sheds on that relationship.

II. How Catechesis Changed

I serve the Archdiocese in which the Baltimore Catechism originated and, as a child, dutifully memorized questions from that venerable text. By the time I was in the sixth or seventh grade, we had new religion text books that were more colorful but still content-laden. It was a different story for my younger brother. I recall mom and dad's lament that his religion text books had little or no content. I do not recall my brother's complaining about that!

Later on I found out about a school of thought that emphasized "religious experience" at the expense of doctrinal content. As Fr. Piet Schoonenberg, S.J. wrote in 1970: "From a mere approach to the message, experience itself has become the theme itself of catechesis. Catechesis has become the interpretation of experience..." ("Revelation & Experience" *Lumen Vitae* 25 (1970), pp. 551-560). This

approach led many religious educators to engage in classroom exercises meant to produce a “religious experience” for their students... art work, free-flowing discussions, service projects, etc., not bad in themselves but light on doctrinal content. Getting the relationship between revelation and experience isn’t always easy and I have no doubt that these religious educators acted with the best of intentions.

Some went further. In a 1977 conference sponsored by the U.S. bishops’ conference, a speaker suggested that one ought not to teach too much content in catechesis for fear it would limit the students’ ability to recognize or experience God if and when God decides to reveal himself in some unexpected way or setting. (Cf. Marie Harris, “Reaction” in B. Marthaler, ed. *Catechesis: Relation and Visions*, Department of Education, United States Catholic Conference, March 1977).

Not too surprisingly this approach led to religious illiteracy among young people, that was documented in the 1980’s in a standardized test and in subsequent tests. Not only was there a failure to communicate “content” – but also a widespread failure to communicate the very idea that God had said something definitive or important about himself and thus a Word that is definitive and of utmost important once for our lives. It wasn’t said nearly enough: “This is so and it’s important for you and me”.

III. Theological Reflections on Catechesis

During this same period there were theological reflections on the relationship between catechesis and theology. For example, at an international catechetical conference in 1971 in Rome, a speaker noted the need to reinterpret the kerygma so that it might be “a fresh word, a warm word, a word for today... a word related to the thought and life of our contemporaries...” (D.S. Amalorpavadass, “Catechesis as a Pastoral Task of the Church, Keynote Address, International Catechetical Congress, Rome 1971).

No one doubts the need to relate the kerygma to life, experience and culture, yet one wonders if some catechetical approaches so domesticated the word of God that it could no longer be perceived as “living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow,

and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). An entirely warm and relevant word will not raise up witnesses to Christ & the Gospel.

Perhaps two other currents of thought can be briefly noted. First is the unfortunate division of Church teaching into the dichotomy of “infallible” versus “reformable” teachings. The impression lent was that most of what the Church teaches is quite malleable. For example, in 1974, Fr. Richard McBrien wrote: “There are very few beliefs indeed which one must accept in order to remain in good standing within the Christian community”.

In the same article, Fr. McBrien exemplified a second current of thought that was widely shared at the time. While not denying the distinction between faith and theology, he asserted that: “When all is said and done, religious educators, bishops, preachers, and the Church at large do not transmit ‘the faith’. They transmit particular interpretations or understandings of faith...” (Richard McBrien, “Faith, Theology, and Belief” *Commonweal* (1974), pp ...) This contrasts with *Dei Verbum*, no. 5 where the II Vatican Council teaches that faith is both a personal relationship with God and an assenting to the truth revealed by God. To hold that God has revealed very little about himself or about ourselves and how we are to live...is to create a distorted picture of God: not a loving, compassionate, merciful Father who cares for His people but rather a distant, vague, aloof, apathetic, uncaring God-not the God of Jesus Christ!

IV. Contemporary Situation

I mention this recent history not to wallow in it but only to recognize its continued impact on catechesis and the New Evangelization. The young people on our campuses today are the daughters and sons of those formed in that era. Some are in need of evangelization and others are completely un-catechesized. There are many notable exceptions but they are by and large exceptions to a general pastoral situation all of us grapple with in one way or another. Nonetheless, there are new signs of hope and excellent resources for us to draw on, of which the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is the greatest.

Prior to that, in his 1979 post-synodal exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae*, Blessed John Paul II clarified the relationship between catechesis and evangelization.

Evangelization is “the initial proclamation of the Gospel or missionary preaching of the kerygma to arouse faith” (CT, 18)... whereas ... catechesis is the systematic & organic presentation of the content of the faith. Evangelization and catechesis overlap and serve each other; indeed, Blessed John Paul II saw catechesis as a principal “moment” of evangelization. All those involved in Christian formation must be attentive to both. To quote Blessed John Paul II: “...‘catechesis’ must often concern itself not only with nourishing & teaching the faith but also with arousing it unceasingly with the help of grace, with the opening of the heart, with converting, and with preparing total adherence to Jesus Christ on the part of those who are still on the threshold of the faith” (CT, 19).

What is true for catechesis is also true for theology, if I may say so. In the words of Aiden Nichols, theology is “...the disciplined exploration of what is contained in revelation” (*The Shape of Theology: An Introduction to Its Sources, Principles*, p. 32). So too, just recently the International Theological Commission, in its message for the Year of Faith, wrote: “... *fides quaerens intellectum*, theology exists only in relation to the gift of faith. It presupposes the gift of faith and endeavors to demonstrate its ‘boundless riches’ (Eph. 3:8) both for the spiritual joy of the whole community of believers and as a service to the Church’s evangelizing mission.”

Theologians must be free to explore new avenues of research, to pose new questions or attempt new ways to answer the questions and challenges from the faithful and the world today. Much of the work will be tentative, provisional, and speculative. At the same time, a statement sometimes said by theologians, viz., “I am not doing catechesis but theology,” bears critical examination. Theologians need to be careful not to let their explorations in theology disturb or ‘unbalance’ the maturing faith of those still being catechized. Further, theology and catechesis are indeed part of a faith continuum: they are not two disparate, unrelated activities. As Blessed John Paul II put it: “Aware of the influence that their research and their statements have on catechesis, theologians and exegetes have a duty to take great care that people do not take for a certainty what on the contrary belongs to the areas of questions & discussions among exegetes. Catechists for their part must have the wisdom to pick from the field of theological research those points that can provide light for their own reflection and teaching...” (CT, 19).

In accord with the theme of a continuum of faith on which evangelization, catechesis, and theology are all located, we need to sound another note found in the instruction on *The Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, and it's this: to reject the Church's authentic teaching is, in a way, to cease doing Catholic theology. By contrast, theology which is truly faith seeking understanding, truly enriches both catechesis and evangelization.

V. Application

All of us are aware of the catechetical crisis on our campuses. One symptom is the decline in Mass attendance that occurs between the freshman year and the junior year, as seen in a 2010 CARA study. In general we are losing about 1/3 of Catholics on our college campuses, and this is happening at a very formative moment in their lives. This is an issue that is of greatest concern for us all.

One step we can take is to ensure throughout the curriculum that there is a sound philosophical and theological anthropology consistent with a robust expression of the Catholic faith, an anthropology that steers a middle course between skepticism and fundamentalism, that rejects belief as a mere leap in the dark yet recognizes we are not yet in full possession of what faith portends (cf. CT, 60).

At the undergraduate level, at least, this means that classroom efforts first take the form of evangelization, catechesis, and faith formation. Our students must learn to walk before they can run, to drink the milk of sound doctrine before moving on to the solid food of theological exploration, to echo St. Paul's thought in First Corinthians (cf. 1 Cor. 3:2).

Finally, let me say that in these days when faith is in danger of dying out in so many areas of the world, including the culture of which we are a part, our overriding priority should be to make God present in the world and to show men and women the way to God: "Not just any god, but the God who spoke on Sinai; to that God whose face recognize in a love which presses 'to the end' (cf. Jn. 13:1) - in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen" (Benedict XVI).

Warmest thanks for your attention and may the good and gracious Lord bless our mutual efforts on behalf of his Kingdom.